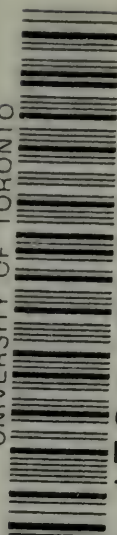


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Sir WALTER BESANT  
AND  
HENRY JAMES

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THE

ART OF FICTION

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# THE ART OF FICTION:

## A LECTURE

DELIVERED AT THE ROYAL INSTITUTION, APRIL 25, 1884.

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I DESIRE, this evening, to consider Fiction as one of the Fine Arts. In order to do this, and before doing it, I have first to advance certain propositions. They are not new, they are not likely to be disputed, and yet they have never been so generally received as to form part, so to speak, of the national mind. These propositions are three, though the last two directly spring from the first. They are:—

1. That Fiction is an Art in every way worthy to be called the sister and the equal of the Arts of Painting, Sculpture, Music, and Poetry; that is to say, her field is as boundless, her possibilities as vast, her excellences as worthy of admiration, as may be claimed for any of her sister Arts.

2. That it is an Art which, like them, is governed and directed by general laws; and that these laws may be laid down and taught with as much precision and exactness as the laws of harmony, perspective, and proportion.

3. That, like the other Fine Arts, Fiction is so far removed from the mere mechanical arts, that

no laws or rules whatever can teach it to those who have not already been endowed with the natural and necessary gifts.

These are the three propositions which I have to discuss. It follows as a corollary and evident deduction that, these propositions once admitted, those who follow and profess the Art of Fiction must be recognized as artists, in the strictest sense of the word, just as much as those who have delighted and elevated mankind by music and painting; and that the great Masters of Fiction must be placed on the same level as the great Masters in the other Arts. In other words, I mean that where the highest point, or what seems the highest point, possible in this Art is touched, the man who has reached it is one of the world's greatest men.

I cannot suppose that there are any in this room who would refuse to admit these propositions; on the contrary, they will seem to most here self-evident; yet the application of theory to practice, of principle to persons, may be more difficult. For instance, so boundless is the admiration for great Masters such as Raphael or Mozart, that if one were to propose that Thackeray should be placed beside them, on the same level, and as an equal, there would be felt by most a certain shock. I am not suggesting that the art of Thackeray is to be compared with that of Raphael, or that there is any similarity in the work of the two men; I only say that, Fiction being one Art, and Painting another and a sister Art,



those who attain the highest possible distinction in either are equal.

Let us, however, go outside this room, among the multitudes by whom a novelist has never been considered an artist at all. To them the claim that a great novelist should be considered to occupy the same level as a great musician, a great painter, or a great poet, would appear at first a thing ludicrous and even painful. Consider for a moment how the world at large regards the novelist. He is, in their eyes, a person who tells stories, just as they used to regard the actor as a man who tumbled on the stage to make the audience laugh, and a musician as a man who fiddled to make the people dance. This is the old way of thinking, and most people think first as they have been taught to think; and next as they see others think. It is therefore quite easy to understand why the art of novel-writing has always been, by the general mass, undervalued. First, while the leaders in every other branch of Art, in every department of Science, and in every kind of profession, receive their share of the ordinary national distinctions, no one ever hears of honors being bestowed upon novelists. Neither Thackeray nor Dickens was ever, so far as I know, offered a Peerage; neither King, Queen, nor Prince in any country throughout the whole world takes the least notice of them. I do not say they would be any the better for this kind of recognition, but its absence clearly proves, to those who take their

opinions from others, that they are not a class at all worthy of special honor. Then again, in the modern craze which exists for every kind of art—so that we meet everywhere, in every household, amateur actors, painters, etchers, sculptors, modellers, musicians, and singers, all of them serious and earnest in their aims—amateur novelists alone regard their Art as one which is learned by intuition. Thirdly, novelists are not associated as are painters; they hold no annual exhibitions, dinners, or conversazioni; they put no letters after their name; they have no President or Academy; and they do not themselves seem desirous of being treated as followers of a special Art. I do not say that they are wrong, or that much would be gained for Art if all the novelists of England were invited to Court and created into a Royal Academy. But I do say that for these three reasons it is easy to understand how the world at large does not even suspect that the writing of novels is one of the Fine Arts, and why they regard the story-teller with a sort of contempt. It is, I acknowledge, a kindly contempt—even an affectionate contempt; it is the contempt which the practical man feels for the dreamer, the strong man for the weak, the man who can do for the man who can only look on and talk.

The general—the Philistine—view of the Profession is, first of all, that it is not one which a scholar and a man of serious views should take up: the telling of stories is inconsistent with a well-



balanced mind; to be a teller of stories disqualifies one from a hearing on important subjects. At this very day there are thousands of living people who will never understand how the author of "Coningsby" and "Vivian Grey" can possibly be regarded as a serious statesman—all the Disraeli literature, even to the comic cartoons, expresses the popular sentiment that a novelist must not presume to call himself a statesman: the intellect of a novelist, it is felt, if he have any intellect at all, which is doubtful, must be one of the most frivolous and lightest kind; how can a man whose mind is always full of the loves of Corydon and Amaryllis be trusted to form an opinion on practical matters? When Thackeray ventured to contest the city of Oxford, we know what happened. He thought his failure was because the people of Oxford had never even heard of him; I think otherwise. I think it was because it was whispered from house to house and was carried from shop to shop, and was mentioned in the vestry, that this fellow from London, who asked for their votes, was nothing but a common novelist.

With these people must not be confounded another class, not so large, who are prepared to admit that Fiction is in some qualified sense an Art; but they do this as a concession to the vanity of its followers, and are by no means prepared to allow that it is an Art of the first rank. How can that be an Art, they might ask, which has no

lecturers or teachers, no school or college or Academy, no recognized rules, no text-books, and is not taught in any University? Even the German Universities, which teach everything else, do not have Professors of Fiction, and not one single novelist, so far as I know, has ever pretended to teach his mystery, or spoken of it as a thing which may be taught. Clearly, therefore, they would go on to argue, such art as is required for the making and telling of a story can and must be mastered without study, because no materials exist for the student's use. It may even, perhaps, be acquired unconsciously or by imitation. This view, I am sorry to say, largely prevails among the majority of those who try their chance in the field of fiction. Anyone, they think, can write a novel; therefore, why not sit down and write one? I would not willingly say one word which might discourage those who are attracted to this branch of literature; on the contrary, I would encourage them in every possible way. One desires, however, that they should approach their work at the outset with the same serious and earnest appreciation of its importance and its difficulties with which they undertake the study of music and painting. I would wish, in short, that from the very beginning their minds should be fully possessed with the knowledge that Fiction is an Art, and, like all other Arts, that it is governed by certain laws, methods, and rules, which it is their first business to learn.



It is then, first and before all, a real Art. It is the oldest, because it was known and practised long before Painting and her sisters were in existence or even thought of; it is older than any of the Muses from whose company she who tells stories has hitherto been excluded; it is the most widely spread, because in no race of men under the sun is it unknown, even though the stories may be always the same, and handed down from generation to generation in the same form; it is the most religious of all the Arts, because in every age until the present the lives, exploits, and sufferings of gods, goddesses, saints, and heroes have been the favorite theme; it has always been the most popular, because it requires neither culture, education, nor natural genius to understand and listen to a story; it is the most moral, because the world has always been taught whatever little morality it possesses by way of story, fable, apologue, parable, and allegory. It commands the widest influence, because it can be carried easily and everywhere, into regions where pictures are never seen and music is never heard; it is the greatest teaching power, because its lessons are most readily apprehended and understood.) All this, which might have been said thousands of years ago, may be said to-day with even greater force and truth. That world which exists not, but is an invention or an imitation — that world in which the shadows and shapes of men move about before our eyes as real as if

they were actually living and speaking among us, is like a great theatre accessible to all of every sort, on whose stage are enacted, at our own sweet will, whenever we please to command them, the most beautiful plays: it is, as every theatre should be, the school in which manners are learned: here the majority of reading mankind learn nearly all that they know of life and manners, of philosophy and art; even of science and religion. The modern novel converts abstract ideas into living models; it gives ideas, it strengthens faith, it preaches a higher morality than is seen in the actual world; it commands the emotions of pity, admiration, and terror; it creates and keeps alive the sense of sympathy; it is the universal teacher; it is the only book which the great mass of reading mankind ever do read; it is the only way in which people can learn what other men and women are like; it redeems their lives from dulness, puts thoughts, desires, knowledge, and even ambitions into their hearts: it teaches them to talk, and enriches their speech with epigrams, anecdotes and illustrations. It is an unfailing source of delight to millions, happily not too critical. Why, out of all the books taken down from the shelves of the public libraries, four-fifths are novels, and of all those that are bought nine-tenths are novels. Compared with this tremendous engine of popular influence, what are all the other Arts put together? Can we not alter the old maxim, and say with truth, Let him who pleases make the laws if I may write the novels?



As for the field with which this Art of Fiction occupies itself, it is, if you please, nothing less than the whole of Humanity. The novelist studies men and women; he is concerned with their actions and their thoughts, their errors and their follies, their greatness and their meanness; the countless forms of beauty and constantly varying moods to be seen among them; the forces which act upon them; the passions, prejudices, hopes and fears which pull them this way and that. He has to do, above all, and before all, with men and women. No one, for instance, among novelists, can be called a landscape painter, or a painter of sea-pieces, or a painter of fruit and flowers, save only in strict subordination to the group of characters with whom he is dealing. Landscape, sea, sky, and air, are merely accessories introduced in order to set off and bring into greater prominence the figures on the stage. The very first rule in Fiction is that the human interest must absolutely absorb everything else. Some writers never permit anything at all in their pages which shall divert our thoughts one moment from the actors. When, for instance, Charles Reade — Alas! that we must say the late Charles Reade, for he is dead — when this great Master of Fiction, in his incomparable tale of the “Cloister and the Hearth,” sends Gerard and Denis the Burgundian on that journey through France, it is with the fewest possible of words that he suggests the sights and persons met with on the way; yet, so great is the

art of the writer, that, almost without being told, we see the road, a mere rough track, winding beside the river and along the valleys; we see the silent forests where lurk the *routiers* and the robbers, the cut-throat inn, the merchants, peasants, beggars, soldiers who go riding by; the writer does not pause in his story to tell us of all this, but yet we feel it — by the mere action of the piece and the dialogue we are compelled to see the scenery: the life of the fifteenth century passes before us, with hardly a word to picture it, because it is always kept in the background, so as not to interfere with the central figure of the young clerk journeying to Rome.

The human interest in Fiction, then, must come before aught else. It is of this world, wholly of this world. It might seem at first as if the limitation of this Art to things human placed it on a lower level than the Arts of Painting and Music. That, however, is not so. The stupendous subjects which were undertaken by the old Italian painters are, it is true, beyond the power of Fiction to attempt. It may be questioned whether they are not also, according to modern ideas, beyond the legitimate scope of painting. Certainly, just as there is nothing in the whole of creation more worthy of being studied and painted than the human face and form, so there is nothing more worthy of representation than men and women in action and in passion. The ancient poet placed the gods themselves upon the stage with the Furies and the Fates. Then



we had the saints, confessors, and martyrs. We next descended to kings and great lords; in our times painter, poet, and novelist alike are contented with plain humanity, whether crowned or in rags. What picture, let us ask, what picture ever painted of angels and blessed souls, even if they are mounting the hill on which stands the Four Square City of the jasper wall, is able to command our interest and sympathy more profoundly than the simple and faithful story, truly and faithfully told, of a lover and his mistress?

It is, therefore, the especial characteristic of this Art, that, since it deals exclusively with men and women, it not only requires of its followers, but also creates in readers, that sentiment which is destined to be a most mighty engine in deepening and widening the civilization of the world. We call it Sympathy, but it means a great deal more than was formerly understood by the word. It means, in fact, what Professor Seeley once called the Enthusiasm of Humanity, and it first appeared, I think, about a hundred and fifty years ago, when the modern novel came into existence. You will find it, for instance, conspicuous for its absence in Defoe. The modern Sympathy includes not only the power to pity the sufferings of others, but also that of understanding their very souls; it is the reverence for man, the respect for his personality, the recognition of his individuality, and the enormous value of the one man, the perception of one man's relation to another, his

duties and responsibilities. Through the strength of this newly-born faculty, and aided by the guidance of a great artist, we are enabled to discern the real indestructible man beneath the rags and filth of a common castaway, and the possibilities of the meanest gutter-child that steals in the streets for its daily bread. Surely that is a wonderful Art which endows the people — all the people — with this power of vision and of feeling. Painting has not done it, and could never do it; Painting has done more for nature than for humanity. Sculpture could not do it, because it deals with situation and form rather than action. Music cannot do it, because Music (if I understand rightly) appeals especially to the individual concerning himself and his own aspirations. Poetry alone is the rival of Fiction, and in this respect it takes a lower place, not because Poetry fails to teach and interpret, but because Fiction is, and must always be, more popular.

Again, this Art teaches, like the others, by suppression and reticence. Out of the great procession of Humanity, the *Comédie Humaine* which the novelist sees passing ever before his eyes, single figures detach themselves one after the other, to be questioned, examined, and received or rejected. This process goes on perpetually. Humanity is so vast a field that to one who goes about watching men and women, and does not sit at home and evolve figures out of inner consciousness, there is not, and can never be, any end or limit to the freshness and interest of



these figures. It is the work of the artist to select the figures, to suppress, to copy, to group, and to work up the incidents which each one offers. The daily life of the world is not dramatic — it is monotonous; the novelist makes it dramatic by his silences, his suppressions, and his exaggerations. No one, for example, in fiction behaves quite in the same way as in real life; as on the stage, if an actor unfolds and reads a letter, the simple action is done with an exaggeration of gesture which calls attention to the thing and to its importance; so in romance, while nothing should be allowed which does not carry on the story, so everything as it occurs must be accentuated and yet deprived of needless accessory details. The gestures of the characters at an important juncture, their looks, their voices, may all be noted if they help to impress the situation. Even the weather, the wind and the rain, with some writers, have been made to emphasize a mood or a passion of a heroine. To know how to use these aids artistically is to the novelist exactly what to the actor is the right presentation of a letter, the handing of a chair, even the removal of a glove.

A third characteristic of Fiction, which should alone be sufficient to give it a place among the noblest forms of Art, is that, like Poetry, Painting, and Music, it becomes a vehicle, not only for the best thoughts of the writer, but also for those of the reader, so that a novelist may write truthfully and faithfully, but simply, and yet be understood in a

far fuller and nobler sense than was present to his own mind. This power is the very highest gift of the poet. He has a vision and sees a thing clearly, yet perhaps afar off; another who reads him is enabled to get the same vision, to see the same thing, yet closer and more distinctly. For a lower intellect thus to lead and instruct a higher is surely a very great gift, and granted only to the highest forms of Art. And this it is which Fiction of the best kind does for its readers. It is, however, only another way of saying that Truth in Fiction produces effects similar to those produced by Truth in every other Art.

So far, then, I have showed that this Art of Fiction is the most ancient of all Arts and the most popular; that its field is the whole of humanity; that it creates and develops that sympathy which is a kind of second sight; that, like all other Arts, its function is to select, to suppress, and to arrange; that it suggests as well as narrates. More might be said — a great deal more — but enough has been said to show that in these, the leading characteristics of any Art, Fiction is on exactly the same level as her sisters. Let me only add that in this Art, as in the others, there is, and will be always, whatever has been done already, something new to discover, something new to express, something new to describe. Surgeons dissect the body, and account for every bone and every nerve, so that the body of one man, considered as a collection of bones and nerves,



is so far exactly like the body of another man. But the mind of man cannot be so exhausted: it yields discoveries to every patient student; it is absolutely inexhaustible; it is to every one a fresh and virgin field: and the most successful investigator leaves regions and tracts for his successor as vast as those he has himself gone over. Perhaps, after all, the greatest Psychologist is not the metaphysician, but the novelist.

We come next to speak of the Laws which govern this Art. I mean those general rules and principles which must necessarily be acquired by every writer of Fiction before he can even hope for success. Rules will not make a man a novelist, any more than a knowledge of grammar makes a man know a language, or a knowledge of musical science makes a man able to play an instrument. Yet the Rules must be learned. And, in speaking of them, one is compelled, so close is the connection between the sister Arts, to use not only the same terms, but also to adopt the same rules, as those laid down by painters for their students. If these Laws appear self-evident, it is a proof that the general principles of the Art are well understood. Considering, however, the vast quantity of bad, inartistic work which is every week laid before the public, one is inclined to think that a statement of these principles may not be without usefulness.

First, and before everything else, there is the Rule that everything in Fiction which is invented **and is**

not the result of personal experience and observation is worthless. In some other Arts, the design may follow any lines which the designer pleases: it may be fanciful, unreal, or grotesque; but in modern Fiction, whose sole end, aim, and purpose is to portray humanity and human character, the design must be in accordance with the customs and general practice of living men and women under any proposed set of circumstances and conditions. That is to say, the characters must be real, and such as might be met with in actual life, or, at least, the natural developments of such people as any of us might meet; their actions must be natural and consistent; the conditions of place, of manners, and of thought must be drawn from personal observation. To take an extreme case: a young lady brought up in a quiet country village should avoid descriptions of garrison life; a writer whose friends and personal experiences belong to what we call the lower middle class should carefully avoid introducing his characters into Society; a South-countryman would hesitate before attempting to reproduce the North-country accent. This is a very simple Rule, but one to which there should be no exception — never to go beyond your own experience.\* Remember

\* It has been objected to this Rule that, if followed, it would entirely shut out the historical novel. Not at all. The interest of the historical novel, as of any other novel, depends upon the experience and knowledge which the writer has of humanity, men and women being pretty much alike in all ages. It is not the setting that we regard, so much as the



that most of the people who read novels, and know nothing about the art of writing them, recognize before any other quality that of fidelity: the greatness of a novelist they measure chiefly by the knowledge of the world displayed in his pages; the highest praise they can bestow upon him is that he has drawn the story to the life. It is exactly the same with a picture. If you go to the Academy any day, and listen to the comments of the crowd,

acting of the characters. The setting in an historical novel is very often absurd, incorrect, and incongruous; but the human interest, the skill and knowledge of character shown by the writer, may make us forget the errors of the setting. For instance, "Romola" is undoubtedly a great novel, not because it contains a true, and therefore valuable, reproduction of Florentine life in the time of the early Renaissance, for it does not; nor because it gives us the ideas of the age, for it does not; the characters, especially that of the heroine, being fully of nineteenth century ideas: but it is great as a study of character. On the other hand, in the "Cloister and the Hearth," we do really have a description of the time and its ideas, taken bodily, sometimes almost literally, from the pages of the man who most truly represents them — Erasmus. So that here is a rule for the historical novelist — when he must describe, he must borrow. If it be objected, again, that he may do the same thing with contemporary life, I reply that he may, if he please, but he will *most assuredly be found out* through some blunder, omission, or confusion caused by ignorance. No doubt the same blunders are perpetrated by the historical novelist; but these are not so readily found out except by an archæologist. Of course, one who desires to reproduce a time gone by would not go to the poets, the divines, the historians, so much as to the familiar literature, the letters, comedies, tales, essayists, and newspapers.

which is a very instructive thing to do, and one recommended to young novelists, you will presently become aware that the only thing they look for in a picture is the story which it tells, and therefore the fidelity with which it is presented on the canvas. Most of the other qualities of the picture, and of the novel as well, all that has to do with the technique, escape the general observer.

This being so, the first thing which has to be acquired is the art of description. It seems easy to describe; any one, it seems, can set down what he sees. But consider. How much does he see? There is everywhere, even in a room, such a quantity of things to be seen: far, far more in field and hedge, in mountain and in forest and beside the stream, are there countless things to be seen; the unpractised eye sees nothing, or next to nothing. Here is a tree, here is a flower, there is sunshine lying on the hill. But to the observant and trained eye, the intelligent eye, there lies before him everywhere an inexhaustible and bewildering mass of things to see. Remember how Mr. Jefferies sits down in a coppice with his eyes wide open to see what the rest of us never dreamed of looking for. Long before he has half finished telling us what he has seen — behold! a volume, and one of the most delightful volumes conceivable. But, then, Mr. Jefferies is a profound naturalist. We cannot all describe after his manner; nor should we try, for the simple reason that descriptions of still life in a



novel must be strictly subordinated to the human interest. But while Mr. Jefferies has his hedge and ditch and brook, we have our towns, our villages, and our assemblies of men and women. Among them we must not only observe, but we must select. Here, then, are two distinct faculties which the intending novelist must acquire; viz., observation and selection. As for the power of observation, it may be taught to any one by the simple method adopted by Robert Houdin, the French conjuror. This method consists of noting down continually and remembering all kinds of things remarked in the course of a journey, a walk, or the day's business. The learner must carry his note-book always with him, into the fields, to the theatre, into the streets — wherever he can watch man and his ways, or Nature and her ways. On his return home he should enter his notes in his commonplace-book. There are places where the production of a note-book would be embarrassing — say, at a dinner-party, or a street fight; yet the man who begins to observe will speedily be able to remember everything that he sees and hears until he can find an opportunity to note it down, so that nothing is lost.\*

\* I earnestly recommend those who desire to study this Art to begin by daily practice in the description of things, even common things, that they have observed, by reporting conversations, and by word portraits of their friends. They will find that the practice gives them firmness of outline, quickness of observation, power of catching important details, and, as regards dialogue, readiness to see what is unim-

The materials for the novelist, in short, ~~are not in~~ the books upon the shelves, but in the men and women he meets with everywhere; he will find them, where Dickens found them, in the crowded streets, in trains, tramcars and omnibuses, at the shop-windows, in churches and chapels: his materials are everywhere — there is nothing too low, nothing too high, nothing too base, nothing too noble, for the novelist. Humanity is like a kaleidoscope, which you may turn about and look into, but you will never get the same picture twice — it cannot be exhausted. But it may be objected, that the broad distinctive types have been long since all used. They *have* been used, but the comfort is that they can never be used up, and that they may be constantly used again and again. Can we ever be tired of them when a master hand takes one of them again and gives him new life? Are there to be no more hypocrites because we have already had Tartufe and Pecksniff? Do we suppose that the old miser, the young spendthrift, the gambler, the adventurer, the coquette, the drunkard, the soldier of fortune, are never to reappear, because they have been handled already? As long, on the contrary, as man shall continue story-telling, so long will these characters occur again and again, and look as fresh

portant. Preliminary practice and study of this kind will also lead to the saving of a vast quantity of valuable material, which is only wasted by being prematurely worked up into a novel written before the elements of the Art have been acquired.



each time that they are treated by a master's hand as if they were newly discovered types.

Fidelity, therefore, can be only assured by acquiring the art of observation, which further assists in filling the mind with stored experience. I am quite sure that most men never see anything at all. I have known men who have even gone all round the world and seen nothing—no, nothing at all. Emerson says, very truly, that a traveller takes away nothing from a place except what he brought into it. Now, the observation of things around us is no part of the ordinary professional and commercial life; it has nothing at all to do with success and the making of money; so that we do not learn to observe. Yet it is very easy to shake people and make them open their eyes. Some of us remember, for instance, the time when Kingsley astonished everybody with his descriptions of the wonders to be seen on the sea-shore and to be fished out of every pond in the field. Then all the world began to poke about the seaweed and to catch tritons and keep water-grubs in little tanks. It was only a fashion, and it presently died out; but it did people good, because it made them understand, perhaps for the first time, that there really is a good deal more to see than meets the casual eye. At present the lesson which we need is not that the world is full of the most strange and wonderful creatures, all eating each other perpetually, but that the world is full of the most wonderful men and women, not one of whom is mean or

common, but to each his own personality is a great and awful thing, worthy of the most serious study.

There are, then, abundant materials waiting to be picked up by any who has the wit to see them lying at his feet and all around him. What is next required is the power of Selection. Can this be taught? I think not, at least I do not know how, unless it is by reading. In every Art, selection requires that kind of special fitness for the Art which is included in the much abused word Genius. In Fiction the power of selection requires a large share of the dramatic sense. Those who already possess this faculty will not go wrong if they bear in mind the simple rule that nothing should be admitted which does not advance the story, illustrate the characters, bring into stronger relief the hidden forces which act upon them, their emotions, their passions, and their intentions. All descriptions which hinder instead of helping the action, all episodes of whatever kind, all conversation which does not either advance the story or illustrate the characters, ought to be rigidly suppressed.

Closely connected with selection is dramatic presentation. Given a situation, it should be the first care of the writer to present it as dramatically, that is to say as forcibly, as possible. The grouping and setting of the picture, the due subordination of description to dialogue, the rapidity of the action, those things which naturally suggest themselves to the practised eye, deserve to be very carefully considered by the beginner. In fact, a novel is like a



play: it may be divided into scenes and acts, tableaux and situations, separated by the end of the chapter instead of the drop-scene: the writer is the dramatist, stage-manager, scene-painter, actor, and carpenter, all in one; it is his single business to see that none of the scenes flag or fall flat: he must never for one moment forget to consider how the piece is looking from the front.

The next simple Rule is that the drawing of each figure must be clear in outline, and, even if only sketched, must be sketched without hesitation. This can only be done when the writer himself sees his figures clearly. Characters in fiction do not, it must be understood, spring Minerva-like from the brain. They grow: they grow sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly. From the first moment of conception, that is to say, from the first moment of their being seen and caught, they grow continuously and almost without mental effort. If they do not grow and become every day clearer, they had better be put aside at once, and forgotten as soon as may be, because that is a proof that the author does not understand the character he has himself endeavored to create. To have on one's hands a half-created being without the power of finishing him must be a truly dreadful thing. The only way out of it is to kill and bury him at once. I have always thought, for instance, that the figure of Daniel Deronda, whose portrait, blurred and uncertain as it is, has been drawn with the most amazing care and

with endless touches and retouches, must have become at last to George Eliot a kind of awful veiled spectre, always in her brain, always seeming about to reveal his true features and his mind, but never doing it, so that to the end she never clearly perceived what manner of man he was, nor what was his real character. Of course, what the author cannot set down, the reader cannot understand. On the other hand, how possible, how capable of development, how real becomes a true figure, truly understood by the creator, and truly depicted! Do we not know what they would say and think under all conceivable conditions? We can dress them as we will; we can place them in any circumstances of life: we can always trust them because they will never fail us, never disappoint us, never change, because we understand them so thoroughly. So well do we know them that they become our advisers, our guides, and our best friends, on whom we model ourselves, our thoughts, and our actions. The writer who has succeeded in drawing to the life, true, clear, distinct, so that all may understand, a single figure of a true man or woman, has added another exemplar or warning to humanity. Nothing, then, it must be insisted upon as of the greatest importance, should be begun in writing until the characters are so clear and distinct in the brain, so well known, that they will act their parts, bend their dialogue, and suit their action to whatever situations they may find themselves in, if only they



are becoming to them. Of course, clear outline drawing is best when it is accomplished in the fewest strokes, and the greater part of the figures in Fiction, wherein it differs from Painting, in which everything should be finished, require no more work upon them, in order to make them clear, than half-a-dozen bold, intelligible lines.

As for the methods of conveying a clear understanding of a character, they are many. The first and the easiest is to make it clear by reason of some mannerism or personal peculiarity, some trick of speech or of carriage. This is the worst, as may generally be said of the easiest way. Another easy method is to describe your character at length. This also is a bad, because a tedious, method. If, however, you read a page or two of any good writer, you will discover that he first makes a character intelligible by a few words, and then allows him to reveal himself in action and dialogue. On the other hand, nothing is more inartistic than to be constantly calling attention in a dialogue to a gesture or a look, to laughter or to tears. The situation generally requires no such explanation: in some well-known scenes which I could quote, there is not a single word to emphasize or explain the attitude, manner, and look of the speakers, yet they are as intelligible as if they were written down and described. That is the highest art which carries the reader along and makes him see, without being told, the changing expressions, the gestures of the speakers,

and hear the varying tones of their voices. It is as if one should close one's eyes at the theatre, and yet continue to see the actors on the stage as well as hear their voices. The only writer who can do this is he who makes his characters intelligible from the very outset, causes them first to stand before the reader in clear outline, and then with every additional line brings out the figure, fills up the face, and makes his creatures grow from the simple outline more and more to the perfect and rounded figure.

Clearness of drawing, which includes clearness of vision, also assists in producing directness of purpose. As soon as the actors in the story become real in the mind of the narrator, and not before, the story itself becomes real to him. More than this, he becomes straightway vehemently impelled to tell it, and he is moved to tell it in the best and most direct way, the most dramatic way, the most truthful way possible to him. It is, in fact, only when the writer believes his own story, and knows it to be every word true, and feels that he has somehow learned from everyone concerned the secret history of his own part in it, that he can really begin to write it.\* We know how sometimes, even from a

\* Hardly anything is more important than this—to believe in your own story. Wherefore let the student remember that unless the characters exist and move about in his brain, all separate, distinct, living, and perpetually engaged in the action of the story, sometimes at one part of it, sometimes at another, and that in scenes and places which



practised hand, there comes a work marred with the fatal defect that the writer does not believe in his own story. When this is the case, one may generally find on investigation that one cause at least of the failure is that the characters, or some of them, are blurred and uncertain.

Again, the modern English novel, whatever form it takes, almost always starts with a conscious moral purpose. When it does not, so much are we accustomed to expect it, that one feels as if there has been a debasement of the Art. It is, fortunately, not possible in this country for any man to defile and defame humanity and still be called an artist; the development of modern sympathy, the growing reverence for the individual, the ever-widening love of things beautiful and the appreciation of lives made beautiful by devotion and self-denial, the sense of personal responsibility among the English-speaking races, the deep-seated religion of our people, even in a time of doubt, are all forces which act strongly upon the artist as well as upon his readers, and lend to his work, whether he will or not, a moral purpose so clearly marked that it has become practically a law of English Fiction. We must acknowledge that this is a truly admirable thing, must be omitted in the writing, he has got no story to tell and had better give it up. I do not think it is generally understood that there are thousands of scenes which belong to the story and never get outside the writer's brain at all. Some of these may be very beautiful and touching; but there is not room for all, and the writer has to select.

and a great cause for congratulation. At the same time, one may be permitted to think that the preaching novel is the least desirable of any, and to be unfeignedly rejoiced that the old religious novel, written in the interests of High Church or Low Church or any other Church, has gone out of fashion.

Next, just as in Painting and Sculpture, not only are fidelity, truth, and harmony to be observed in Fiction, but also beauty of workmanship. It is almost impossible to estimate too highly the value of careful workmanship, that is, of style. Everyone, without exception, of the great Masters in Fiction, has recognized this truth. You will hardly find a single page in any of them which is not carefully and even elaborately worked up. I think there is no point on which critics of novels should place greater importance than this, because it is one which young novelists are so very liable to ignore. There ought not to be in a novel, any more than in a poem, a single sentence carelessly worded, a single phrase which has not been considered. Consider, if you please, any one of the great scenes in Fiction—how much of the effect is due to the style, the balanced sentences, the very words used by the narrator! This, however, is only one more point of similarity between Fiction and the sister Arts. There is, I know, the danger of attaching too much attention to style at the expense of situation, and so falling a prey to priggishness, fashions, and man-



nerisms of the day. It is certainly a danger; at the same time, it sometimes seems, when one reads the slipshod, careless English which is often thought good enough for story-telling, that it is almost impossible to overrate the value of style. There is comfort in the thought that no reputation worth having can be made without attending to style, and that there is no style, however rugged, which cannot be made beautiful by attention and pains. "How many times," a writer once asked a girl who brought him her first effort for advice and criticism; "how many times have you re-written this page?" She confessed that she had written it once for all, had never read it afterwards, and had not the least idea that there was such a thing as style. Is it not presumptuous in the highest degree to believe that what one has produced without pains, thought, or trouble will give any pleasure to the reader?

In fact every scene, however unimportant, should be completely and carefully finished. There should be no unfinished places, no sign anywhere of weariness or haste—in fact, no scamping. The writer must so love his work as to dwell tenderly on every age and be literally unable to send forth a single page of it without the finishing touches. We all of us remember that kind of novel in which every scene has the appearance of being hurried and scamped.

To sum up these few preliminary and general

laws. The Art of Fiction requires first of all the power of description, truth, and fidelity, observation, selection, clearness of conception and of outline, dramatic grouping, directness of purpose, a profound belief on the part of the story-teller in the reality of his story, and beauty of workmanship. It is, moreover, an Art which requires of those who follow it seriously that they must be unceasingly occupied in studying the ways of mankind, the social laws, the religions, philosophies, tendencies, thoughts, prejudices, superstitions of men and women. They must consider as many of the forces which act upon classes and upon individuals as they can discover; they should be always trying to put themselves into the place of another; they must be as inquisitive and as watchful as a detective, as suspicious as a criminal lawyer, as eager for knowledge as a physicist, and withal fully possessed of that spirit to which nothing appears mean, nothing contemptible, nothing unworthy of study, which belongs to human nature.

I repeat that I submit some of these laws as perhaps self-evident. If that is so, many novels which are daily submitted to the reviewer are written in wilful neglect and disobedience of them. But they are not really self-evident; those who aspire to be artists in Fiction almost invariably begin without any understanding at all of these laws. Hence the lamentable early failures, the waste of good material, and the low level of Art with which both the



novel-writer and the novel-reader are too often contented. I am certain that if these laws were better known and more generally studied, a very large proportion of the bad works of which our critics complain would not be produced at all. And I am in great hopes that one effect of the establishment of the newly founded Society of Authors will be to keep young writers of fiction from rushing too hastily into print, to help them to the right understanding of their Art and its principles, and to guide them into true practice of their principles while they are still young, their imaginations strong, and their personal experiences as yet not wasted in foolish failures.

After all these preliminary studies there comes the most important point of all — the story. There is a school which pretends that there is no need for a story: all the stories, they say, have been told already; there is no more room for invention: nobody wants any longer to listen to a story. One hears this kind of talk with the same wonder which one feels when a new monstrous fashion changes the beautiful figure of woman into something grotesque and unnatural. Men say these things gravely to each other, especially men who have no story to tell: other men listen gravely; in the same way women put on the newest and most preposterous fashions gravely, and look upon each other without either laughing or hiding their faces for shame. It is, indeed, if we think of it, a most strange and

wonderful theory, that we should continue to care for Fiction and cease to care for the story. We have all along been training ourselves how to tell the story, and here is this new school which steps in, like the needy knife-grinder, to explain that there is no story left at all to tell. Why, the story is everything. I cannot conceive of a world going on at all without stories, and those strong ones, with incident in them, and merriment and pathos, laughter and tears, and the excitement of wondering what will happen next. Fortunately, these new theorists contradict themselves, because they find it impossible to write a novel which shall not contain a story, although it may be but a puny bantling. Fiction without adventure—a drama without a plot—a novel without surprises—the thing is as impossible as life without uncertainty.\*

As for the story, then. And here theory and teaching can go no farther. For every Art there is the corresponding science which may be taught. We have been speaking of the corresponding science. But the Art itself can neither be taught nor communicated. If the thing is in a man he will bring it out somehow, well or badly, quickly or slowly. If it is not, he can never learn it. Here,

\* A correspondent asks me if I do not like the work of Mr. Howells. Of course one cannot choose but like his writing. But one cannot also avoid comparing his work with that of his countryman, Nathaniel Hawthorne, who added to the charm of style the interest of a romantic and exciting story.



then, let us suppose that we have to do with the man to whom the invention of stories is part of his nature. We will also suppose that he has mastered the laws of his Art, and is now anxious to apply them. To such a man one can only recommend that he should with the greatest care and attention analyze and examine the construction of certain works, which are acknowledged to be of the first rank in fiction. Among them, not to speak of Scott, he might pay especial attention, from the constructive point of view, to the truly admirable shorter stories of Charles Reade, to George Eliot's "Silas Marner," the most *perfect* of English novels, Hawthorne's "Scarlet Letter," Holmes's "Elsie Venner," Blackmore's "Lorna Doone," or Black's "Daughter of Heth." He must not sit down to read them "for the story," as uncritical people say: he must read them slowly and carefully, perhaps backwards, so as to discover for himself how the author built up the novel, and from what original germ or conception it sprang. Let me take another novel by another writer to illustrate my meaning. It is James Payn's "Confidential Agent," a work showing, if I may be permitted to say so, constructive power of the very highest order. You have all, without doubt, read that story. As you know, it turns upon a diamond robbery. To the unpractised hand it would seem as if stories of theft had already been told *ad nauseam*. The man of experience knows better: he knows that in his hands every story becomes new,



because he can place it upon his stage with new incidents, new conditions, and new actors. Accordingly, Payn connects his diamonds with three or four quite ordinary families: he does not search for strange and eccentric characters, but uses the folk he sees around him, plain middle-class people, to whom most of us belong. He does not try to show these people cleverer, better cultured, or in any respect at all other than they really are, except that some of them talk a little better than in real life they would be likely to do. That is to say, in dialogue he exercises the art of selection. Presently, in this quiet household of age and youth, love and happiness, there happens a dreadful thing: the young husband vanishes amid circumstances which give rise to the most horrible suspicions. How this event acts upon the minds of the household and their friends: how the faith, sorely tried, of one breaks down, and that of another remains steadfast: how the truth is gradually disclosed, and the innocence of the suspected man is made clear — all this should be carefully examined by the student as a lesson in construction and machinery. He will not, one hopes, neglect the other lesson taught him by this novel, which is the art of telling the story, selecting the actors, and skilfully using the plain and simple materials which lie around us everywhere ready to our hands. I am quite sure that the chief lesson to be learned from the study of nearly all our own modern novelists is that adventure, pathos,

amusement, and interest, are far better sought among lives which seem dull, and among people who seem at first beyond the reach of romance, than from eccentricity and peculiarity of manner, or from violent and extreme reverses and accidents of fortune. This is, indeed, only another aspect of the increased value which we have learned to attach to individual life.

One thing more the Art student has to learn. Let him not only believe his own story before he begins to tell it, but let him remember that in story-telling, as in almsgiving, a cheerful countenance works wonders, and a hearty manner greatly helps the teller and pleases the listener. One would not have the novelist make continual efforts at being comic; but let him not tell his story with eyes full of sadness, a face of woe and a shaking voice. His story may be tragic, but continued gloom is a mistake in Art, even for a tragedy. If his story is a comedy, all the more reason to tell it cheerfully and brightly. Lastly, let him tell it without apparent effort: without trying to show his cleverness, his wit, his powers of epigram, and his learning. Yet let him pour without stint or measure into his work all that he knows, all that he has seen, all that he has observed, and all that he has remembered: all that there is of nobility, sympathy, and enthusiasm in himself. Let him spare nothing, but lavish all that he has, in the full confidence that the wells will not be dried up, and that the springs of fancy and



imagination will flow again, even though he seem to have exhausted himself in this one effort.

Here, therefore, we may leave the student of this Art.\* It remains for him to show whether he does wisely in following it farther. Of one thing for his encouragement he may rest assured; in the Art of Fiction more than in any other it is easy to gain recognition, far easier than in any of the sister Arts. In the English school of painting, for example, there are already so many good men in the field that it is most difficult to win an acknowledged position; in the drama it is next to impossible to get a play produced, in spite of our thirty London theatres; in poetry it seems almost hopeless to get a hearing, even if one has reached the second rank; but in Fiction the whole of the English-speaking race are always eager to welcome a newcomer; good work is instantly recognized, and the only danger is that the universal cry for more may lead to hasty and immature production. I do not mean that ready recognition will immediately bring with it a great pecuniary success. Unfortunately, there has grown up of late a bad fashion of measuring success too much by the money it seems to command. It is not always, remember, the voice of the people which elects the best man, and though in most cases it follows that a successful novelist commands a large sale of his works, it may happen that the Art of a great writer is of such a kind that it may never become widely

\* See Appendix.



popular. There have been among us two or three such writers. One case will immediately occur to most of us here. It is that of a man whose books are filled with wisdom, experience, and epigram: whose characters are most admirably studied from the life, whose plots are ingenious, situations fresh, and dialogues extraordinarily clever. Yet he has never been widely popular, and, I am sure, never will be. One may be pretty certain that this writer's money-value in the market is considerably less than that of many another whose genius is not half so great, but his popularity twice as large. So that a failure to hit the popular taste does not always imply failure in Art. How, then, is one to know, when people do not ask for his work, if he has really failed or not? I think he must know without being told if he has failed to please. If a man sings a song he can tell in a moment, even before he has finished, if he has pleased his audience. So, if a man writes a novel, he can tell by the criticisms in the journals, by reading between the lines of what his friends tell him, by the expression of their eyes, by his own inner consciousness, if he has succeeded or failed. And if the latter, let him find out as quickly as may be through what causes. The unlucky dramatist can complain that his piece was badly mounted and badly acted. The novelist cannot, because he is sure not to be badly read. Therefore, if a novelist fail at first, let him be well assured that it is his own fault; and if, on his second attempt, he cannot amend, let him

for the future be silent. One is more and more astonished at seeing the repeated efforts of writers whose friends should make them understand that they have not the least chance of success unless they unlearn all that they have learned and begin again upon entirely different methods and some knowledge of the science. It must be a cruel blow, after all the work that goes to make even a bad novel, after all the trouble of getting it published, to see it drop unnoticed, stillborn, thought hardly worthy to receive words of contempt. If the disappointment leads to examination and self-amendment, it may prove the greatest blessing. But he who fails twice probably deserves to fail, because he has learned nothing, and is incapable of learning anything, from the lessons of his first failure.

Let me say one word upon the present condition of this most delightful Art in England. Remember that great Masters in every Art are rare. Perhaps one or two appear in a century: we ought not to expect more. It may even happen that those modern writers of our own whom we have agreed to call great Masters will have to take lower rank among posterity, who will have great Masters of their own. I am inclined, however, to think that a few of the nineteenth-century novelists will never be suffered to die, though they may be remembered principally for one book — that Thackeray will be remembered for his “Vanity Fair,” Dickens for “David Copperfield,” George Meredith for the



“Ordeal of Richard Feverel,” George Eliot for “Silas Marner,” Charles Reade for the “Cloister and the Hearth,” and Blackmore for his “Lorna Doone.” On the other hand, without thinking or troubling ourselves at all about the verdict of posterity, which matters nothing to us compared with the verdict of our contemporaries, let us acknowledge that it is a bad year indeed when we have not produced some good work, work of a very high kind, if not immortal work. An exhibition of the year’s novels would generally show two or three, at least, of which the country may be, say, reasonably proud. Does the Royal Academy of Arts show every year more than two or three pictures — not immortal pictures, but pictures of which we may be reasonably proud? One would like, it is true, to see fewer bad novels published, as well as fewer bad pictures exhibited; the standard of the work which is on the borderland between success and failure should be higher. At the same time I am very sure and certain that there never has been a time when better works of Fiction have been produced, both by men and women. That Art is not declining, but is advancing, which is cultivated on true and not on false or conventional principles. Ought we not to be full of hope for the future, when such women as Mrs. Oliphant and Mrs. Thackeray Ritchie write for us — when such men as Meredith, Blackmore, Black, Payn, Wilkie Collins, and Hardy are still at their best, and such men as Louis Stevenson, Christie Murray,



Clark Russell, and Herman Merivale have just begun? I think the fiction, and, indeed, all the imaginary work of the future will be far fuller in human interest than in the past; the old stories — no doubt they will still be the old stories — will be fitted to actors who up till recently were only used for the purposes of contrast; the drama of life which formerly was assigned to kings and princes will be played by figures taken as much from the great struggling, unknown masses. Kings and great lords are chiefly picturesque and interesting on account of their beautiful costumes, and a traditional belief in their power. Costume is certainly not a strong point in the lower ranks, but I think we shall not miss that, and wherever we go for our material, whether to the higher or the lower ranks, we may be sure of finding everywhere love, sacrifice, and devotion for virtues, with selfishness, cunning, and treachery for vices. Out of these, with their endless combinations and changes, that novelist must be poor indeed who cannot make a story.

Lastly, I said at the outset that I would ask you to accord to novelists the recognition of their place as artists. But after what has been said, I feel that to urge this further would be only a repetition of what has gone before. Therefore, though not all who write novels can reach the first, or even the second, rank, wherever you find good and faithful work, with truth, sympathy, and clearness of purpose, I pray you to give the author of that work the

praise as to an Artist — an Artist like the rest — the praise that you so readily accord to the earnest student of any other Art. As for the great Masters of the Art — Fielding, Scott, Dickens, Thackeray, Victor Hugo — I, for one, feel irritated when the critics begin to appraise, compare, and to estimate them : there is nothing, I think, that we can give them but admiration that is unspeakable, and gratitude that is silent. This silence proves more eloquently than any words how great, how beautiful an Art is that of Fiction.





## APPENDIX.

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I HAVE been asked not to leave the young novelist at this point. Let me, therefore, venture upon a few words of advice. I do this without apology, because, like most men who write, I receive, every week, letters from young beginners asking for counsel and guidance. To all these I recommend the consideration of the rules I have laid down, and, above all, attention to truth, reality, and style.

I was once asked to read a MS. novel written by a young lady. The work was hurried, scamped, unreal — in fact, it had every fault. Yet there was something in it which made me think that there was hope for her. I therefore wrote to her, pointing out the faults, without sparing her. I added that, if she was not discouraged, but would begin again, and would prepare carefully the *scenario* of a novel, fitted with characters duly thought out, I would give her such further advice as was in my power. The *very next day* she sent me five *scenarios*. I have not heard from her since, and I hope she has renounced the Art whose very elements she could not understand.

Let me suppose, then, that the writer has got his novel completed. Here begins the “trouble,” as

the Americans say. And at this point my advice may be of use.

Remember that all publishers are eager to get good work: they are prepared to consider MSS. carefully — most of them pay men, on whose judgment they rely, men of literary standing, to read and “taste” for them; therefore it is a simple and obvious piece of advice that the writer should send his work to some good publisher, and it is perfectly certain that if the work is good it will be accepted and published. There is, as I have said in the lecture, little or no risk, even with an unknown author, over a really good novel. But, then, the first work almost always contains immaturities and errors which prevent it from being really good. More often than not, it is on the border line, not so good as to make its publication desirable by a firm which will only issue good work, or by any means safe to pay its expenses. What then? I would advise the author never, from any considerations of vanity or self-confidence, to pay money to a publisher for bringing out his book. There are certain publishing houses, not the best, which bring out yearly quantities of novels, nearly every one of which is paid for by the author, because they are not good enough to pay their own expenses. Do not, I would say, swell the ranks of those who give the enemy reason to blaspheme this Art. Refuse absolutely to publish on such ignominious terms. Remember that to be asked for money to pay for



the expense of publication is to be told that your work is not good enough to be published. If you have tried the half-dozen best publishers, and been refused by all, realize that the work *will not do*. Then, if you can, get the advice of some experienced man of letters upon it, and ponder over his judgment.

If you cannot, reconsider the whole story from the beginning, with special reference to the rules which are here laid down. If necessary, rewrite the whole. Or, if necessary, put the whole into the fire, and, without being disheartened, begin again with another and a better story. Do not aim at producing an absolutely new plot. You cannot do it. But persevere, if you feel that the root of the matter is in you, till your work is accepted; and *never*, NEVER, NEVER pay for publishing a novel.

Let me end with a little piece of personal history.

A good many years ago, there was a young man of four or five and twenty, who ardently desired before all things to become a novelist. He spent a couple of years, giving to the work all his unemployed hours, over a novel of modern life. He took immense pains with it, rewrote some of the scenes half a dozen times, and spared neither labor nor thought to make it as good as he could make it. When he really felt that he could do nothing more with it, he rolled it up and sent it to a friend with the request that he would place it anonymously in Mr. Macmillan's hands. Mr. Macmillan had it care-



fully read, and sent the author, still through the friend, his reader's opinion. The reader did not sign his opinion, but he was a Cambridge man, a critic of judgment, a man of taste, a kindly man, and he had once been, if he was not still, a mathematician. These things were clearly evident from his handwriting, as well as from the wording of his verdict. This was to the effect that the novel should not be published, for certain reasons which he proceeded to give. But he laid down his objections with very great consideration for the writer, indicating for his encouragement what he considered points of promise, suggesting certain practical rules of construction which had been violated, and showing where ignorance of the Art and inexperience of life had caused faults such as to make it most undesirable for the author, as well as impossible for a publisher of standing, to produce the work. The writer, after the first pangs of disappointment, plucked up heart and began to ponder over the lessons contained in that opinion. The young man has since become a novelist, "of a sort," and he takes this opportunity of returning his most sincere thanks to Mr. Macmillan for his kindness in considering and refusing to publish an immature novel, and to his anonymous critic for his invaluable letter. Would that all publishers' readers were like unto that reader, as conscientious and as kindly, and as anxious to save beginners from putting forth bad work!

THE ART OF FICTION.

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BY HENRY JAMES.





## THE ART OF FICTION.

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I SHOULD not have affixed so comprehensive a title to these few remarks, necessarily wanting in any completeness, upon a subject the full consideration of which would carry us far, did I not seem to discover a pretext for my temerity in the interesting pamphlet lately published under this name by Mr. Walter Besant. Mr. Besant's lecture at the Royal Institution — the original form of his pamphlet — appears to indicate that many persons are interested in the art of fiction, and are not indifferent to such remarks as those who practise it may attempt to make about it. I am therefore anxious not to lose the benefit of this favorable association, and to edge in a few words under cover of the attention which Mr. Besant is sure to have excited. There is something very encouraging in his having put into form certain of his ideas on the mystery of story-telling.

It is a proof of life and curiosity — curiosity on the part of the brotherhood of novelists, as well as

on the part of their readers. Only a short time ago it might have been supposed that the English novel was not what the French call *discutable*. It had no air of having a theory, a conviction, a consciousness of itself behind it — of being the expression of an artistic faith, the result of choice and comparison. I do not say it was necessarily the worse for that; it would take much more courage than I possess to intimate that the form of the novel, as Dickens and Thackeray (for instance) saw it, had any taint of incompleteness. It was, however, *naïf* (if I may help myself out with another French word); and, evidently, if it is destined to suffer in any way for having lost its *naïveté*, it has now an idea of making sure of the corresponding advantages. During the period I have alluded to there was a comfortable, good-humored feeling abroad that a novel is a novel, as a pudding is a pudding, and that this was the end of it. But within a year or two, for some reason or other, there have been signs of returning animation — the era of discussion would appear to have been to a certain extent opened. Art lives upon discussion, upon experiment, upon curiosity, upon variety of attempt, upon the exchange of views and the comparison of standpoints; and there is a presumption that those times when no one has anything particular to say about it, and has no reason to give for practice or preference, though they may be times of genius, are not times of development, are times, possibly even, a little of dulness.

The successful application of any art is a delightful spectacle, but the theory, too, is interesting; and though there is a great deal of the latter without the former, I suspect there has never been a genuine success that has not had a latent core of conviction. Discussion, suggestion, formulation, these things are fertilizing when they are frank and sincere. Mr. Besant has set an excellent example in saying what he thinks, for his part, about the way in which fiction should be written, as well as about the way in which it should be published; for his view of the "art," carried on into an appendix, covers that too. Other laborers in the same field will doubtless take up the argument, they will give it the light of their experience, and the effect will surely be to make our interest in the novel a little more what it had for some time threatened to fail to be—a serious, active, inquiring interest, under protection of which this delightful study may, in moments of confidence, venture to say a little more what it thinks of itself.

It must take itself seriously for the public to take it so. The old superstition about fiction being "wicked" has doubtless died out in England; but the spirit of it lingers in a certain oblique regard directed toward any story which does not more or less admit that it is only a joke. Even the most jocular novel feels in some degree the weight of the proscription that was formerly directed against literary levity; the jocularity does not always suc-



ceed in passing for gravity. It is still expected, though perhaps people are ashamed to say it, that a production which is after all only a "make believe" (for what else is a "story?") shall be in some degree apologetic — shall renounce the pretension of attempting really to compete with life. This, of course, any sensible wide-awake story declines to do; for it quickly perceives that the tolerance granted to it on such a condition is only an attempt to stifle it, disguised in the form of generosity. The old Evangelical hostility to the novel, which was as explicit as it was narrow, and which regarded it as little less favorable to our immortal part than a stage-play, was in reality far less insulting. The only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does compete with life. When it ceases to compete as the canvas of the painter competes, it will have arrived at a very strange pass. It is not expected of the picture that it will make itself humble in order to be forgiven; and the analogy between the art of the painter and the art of the novelist is, so far as I am able to see, complete. Their inspiration is the same, their process (allowing for the different quality of the vehicle) is the same, their success is the same. They may learn from each other, they may explain and sustain each other. Their cause is the same, and the honor of one is the honor of another. Peculiarities of manner, of execution, that correspond on either side, exist in each of them and contribute to their devel-

opment. The Mahometans think a picture an unholy thing, but it is a long time since any Christian did, and it is therefore the more odd that in the Christian mind the traces (dissimulated though they may be) of a suspicion of the sister art should linger to this day. The only effectual way to lay it to rest is to emphasize the analogy to which I just alluded — to insist on the fact that, as the picture is reality, so the novel is history. That is the only general description (which does it justice) that we may give of the novel. But history also is allowed to compete with life, as I say; it is not, any more than painting, expected to apologize. The subject-matter of fiction is stored up likewise in documents and records, and if it will not give itself away, as they say in California, it must speak with assurance, with the tone of the historian. Certain accomplished novelists have a habit of giving themselves away which must often bring tears to the eyes of people who take their fiction seriously. I was lately struck, in reading over many pages of Anthony Trollope, with his want of discretion in this particular. In a digression, a parenthesis or an aside, he concedes to the reader that he and this trusting friend are only "making believe." He admits that the events he narrates have not really happened, and that he can give his narrative any turn the reader may like best. Such a betrayal of a sacred office seems to me, I confess, a terrible crime; it is what I mean by the attitude of



apology, and it shocks me every whit as much in Trollope as it would have shocked me in Gibbon or Macaulay. It implies that the novelist is less occupied in looking for the truth than the historian, and in doing so it deprives him at a stroke of all his standing-room. To represent and illustrate the past, the actions of men, is the task of either writer, and the only difference that I can see is, in proportion as he succeeds, to the honor of the novelist, consisting as it does in his having more difficulty in collecting his evidence, which is so far from being purely literary. It seems to me to give him a great character, the fact that he has at once so much in common with the philosopher and the painter; this double analogy is a magnificent heritage.

It is of all this evidently that Mr. Besant is full when he insists upon the fact that fiction is one of the fine arts, deserving in its turn of all the honors and emoluments that have hitherto been reserved for the successful profession of music, poetry, painting, architecture. It is impossible to insist too much on so important a truth, and the place that Mr. Besant demands for the work of the novelist may be represented, a trifle less abstractly, by saying that he demands not only that it shall be reputed artistic, but that it shall be reputed very artistic indeed. It is excellent that he should have struck this note, for his doing so indicates that there was need of it, that his proposition may be to many people a novelty.



One rubs one's eyes at the thought ; but the rest of Mr. Besant's essay confirms the revelation. I suspect, in truth, that it would be possible to confirm it still further, and that one would not be far wrong in saying that in addition to the people to whom it has never occurred that a novel ought to be artistic, there are a great many others who, if this principle were urged upon them, would be filled with an indefinable mistrust. They would find it difficult to explain their repugnance, but it would operate strongly to put them on their guard. "Art," in our Protestant communities, where so many things have got so strangely twisted about, is supposed, in certain circles, to have some vaguely injurious effect upon those who make it an important consideration, who let it weigh in the balance. It is assumed to be opposed in some mysterious manner to morality, to amusement, to instruction. When it is embodied in the work of the painter (the sculptor is another affair!) you know what it is; it stands there before you, in the honesty of pink and green and a gilt frame; you can see the worst of it at a glance, and you can be on your guard. But when it is introduced into literature it becomes more insidious—there is danger of its hurting you before you know it. Literature should be either instructive or amusing, and there is in many minds an impression that these artistic pre-occupations, the search for form, contribute to neither end, interfere, indeed, with both. They are too frivolous to be edifying, and

too serious to be diverting; and they are, moreover, priggish and paradoxical and superfluous. That, I think, represents the manner in which the latent thought of many people who read novels as an exercise in skipping would explain itself if it were to become articulate. They would argue, of course, that a novel ought to be "good," but they would interpret this term in a fashion of their own, which, indeed, would vary considerably from one critic to another. One would say that being good means representing virtuous and aspiring characters, placed in prominent positions; another would say that it depends for a "happy ending" on a distribution at the last of prizes, pensions, husbands, wives, babies, millions, appended paragraphs, and cheerful remarks. Another still would say that it means being full of incident and movement, so that we shall wish to jump ahead, to see who was the mysterious stranger, and if the stolen will was ever found, and shall not be distracted from this pleasure by any tiresome analysis or "description." But they would all agree that the "artistic" idea would spoil some of their fun. One would hold it accountable for all the description, another would see it revealed in the absence of sympathy. Its hostility to a happy ending would be evident, and it might even, in some cases, render any ending at all impossible. The "ending" of a novel is, for many persons, like that of a good dinner, a course of dessert and ices, and the artist in fiction is regarded as a sort of meddle-



some doctor who forbids agreeable aftertastes. It is therefore true that this conception of Mr. Besant's, of the novel as a superior form, encounters not only a negative but a positive indifference. It matters little that, as a work of art, it should really be as little or as much concerned to supply happy endings, sympathetic characters, and an objective tone, as if it were a work of mechanics; the association of ideas, however incongruous, might easily be too much for it if an eloquent voice were not sometimes raised to call attention to the fact that it is at once as free and as serious a branch of literature as any other.

Certainly, this might sometimes be doubted in presence of the enormous number of works of fiction that appeal to the credulity of our generation, for it might easily seem that there could be no great substance in a commodity so quickly and easily produced. It must be admitted that good novels are somewhat compromised by bad ones, and that the field at large suffers discredit from overcrowding. I think, however, that this injury is only superficial, and that the superabundance of written fiction proves nothing against the principle itself. It has been vulgarized, like all other kinds of literature, like everything else to-day, and it has proved more than some kinds accessible to vulgarization. But there is as much difference as there ever was between a good novel and a bad one; the bad is swept, with all the daubed canvases and spoiled marble, into



some unvisited limbo or infinite rubbish-yard, beneath the back-windows of the world, and the good subsists and emits its light and stimulates our desire for perfection. As I shall take the liberty of making but a single criticism of Mr. Besant, whose tone is so full of the love of his art, I may as well have done with it at once. He seems to me to mistake in attempting to say so definitely beforehand what sort of an affair the good novel will be. To indicate the danger of such an error as that has been the purpose of these few pages; to suggest that certain traditions on the subject, applied *a priori*, have already had much to answer for, and that the good health of an art which undertakes so immediately to reproduce life must demand that it be perfectly free. It lives upon exercise, and the very meaning of exercise is freedom. [The only obligation to which in advance we may hold a novel without incurring the accusation of being arbitrary, is that it be interesting. That general responsibility rests upon it, but it is the only one I can think of.] The ways in which it is at liberty to accomplish this result (of interesting us) strike me as innumerable and such as can only suffer from being marked out, or fenced in, by prescription. They are as various as the temperament of man, and they are successful in proportion as they reveal a particular mind, different from others. [A novel is in its broadest definition a personal impression of life; that, to begin with, constitutes its value, which is greater or less according

to the intensity of the impression. But there will be no intensity at all, and therefore no value, unless there is freedom to feel and say. ] The tracing of a line to be followed, of a tone to be taken, of a form to be filled out, is a limitation of that freedom and a suppression of the very thing that we are most curious about. The form, it seems to me, is to be appreciated after the fact ; then the author's choice has been made, his standard has been indicated ; then we can follow lines and directions and compare tones. Then, in a word, we can enjoy one of the most charming of pleasures, we can estimate quality, we can apply the test of execution. The execution belongs to the author alone ; it is what is most personal to him, and we measure him by that. [ The advantage, the luxury, as well as the torment and responsibility, of the novelist, is that there is no limit to what he may attempt as an executant — no limit to his possible experiments, efforts, discoveries, successes. Here it is especially that he works, step by step, like his brother of the brush, of whom we may always say that he has painted his picture in a manner best known to himself. His manner is his secret, not necessarily a deliberate one. He cannot disclose it, as a general thing, if he would ; he would be at a loss to teach it to others. I say this with a due recollection of having insisted on the community of method of the artist who paints a picture and the artist who writes a novel. [ The painter is able to teach the rudiments of his practice, and it is possible,



from the study of good work (granted the aptitude), both to learn how to paint and to learn how to write. Yet it remains true, without injury to the *rapprochement*, that the literary artist would be obliged to say to his pupil much more than the other, "Ah, well, you must do it as you can!" It is a question of degree, a matter of delicacy. If there are exact sciences there are also exact arts, and the grammar of painting is so much more definite that it makes the difference.

I ought to add, however, that if Mr. Besant says at the beginning of his essay that the "laws of fiction may be laid down and taught with as much precision and exactness as the laws of harmony, perspective, and proportion," he mitigates what might appear to be an over-statement by applying his remark to "general" laws, and by expressing most of these rules in a manner with which it would certainly be unaccommodating to disagree. That the novelist must write from his experience, that his "characters must be real and such as might be met with in actual life;" that "a young lady brought up in a quiet country village should avoid descriptions of garri-son life," and "a writer whose friends and personal experiences belong to the lower middle-class should carefully avoid introducing his characters into Society;" that one should enter one's notes in a commonplace book; that one's figures should be clear in outline; that making them clear by some trick of speech or of carriage is a bad method, and "describ-




ing them at length" is a worse one; that English Fiction should have a "conscious moral purpose;" that "it is almost impossible to estimate too highly the value of careful workmanship — that is, of style;" that "the most important point of all is the story," that "the story is everything" — these are principles with most of which it is surely impossible not to sympathize. That remark about the lower middle-class writer and his knowing his place is perhaps rather chilling; but for the rest, I should find it difficult to dissent from any one of these recommendations. At the same time I should find it difficult positively to assent to them, with the exception, perhaps, of the injunction as to entering one's notes in a common place book. They scarcely seem to me to have the quality that Mr. Besant attributes to the rules of the novelist — the "precision and exactness" of "the laws of harmony, perspective, and proportion." They are suggestive, they are even inspiring, but they are not exact, though they are doubtless as much so as the case admits of; which is a proof of that liberty of interpretation for which I just contended. For the value of these different injunctions — so beautiful and so vague — is wholly in the meaning one attaches to them. The characters, the situation, which strike one as real, will be those that touch and interest one most, but the measure of reality is very difficult to fix. The reality of Don Quixote or Mr. Micawber is a very delicate shade; it is a reality so colored by the author's vision that, vivid as it may

be, one would hesitate to propose it as a model; one would expose one's self to some very embarrassing questions on the part of a pupil. [It goes without saying that you will not write a good novel unless you possess the sense of reality; but it will be difficult to give you a recipe for calling that sense into being. Humanity is immense, and reality has a myriad forms; the most one can affirm is that some of the flowers of fiction have the odor of it, and others have not; as for telling you in advance how your nosegay should be composed, that is another affair. It is equally excellent and inconclusive to say that one must write from experience; to our supposititious aspirant such a declaration might savor of mockery. What kind of experience is intended, and where does it begin and end? Experience is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web, of the finest silken threads, suspended in the chamber of consciousness and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue. It is the very atmosphere of the mind; and when the mind is imaginative — much more when it happens to be that of a man of genius — it takes to itself the faintest hints of life, it converts the very pulses of the air into revelations.] The young lady living in a village has only to be a damsel upon whom nothing is lost to make it quite unfair (as it seems to me) to declare to her that she shall have nothing to say about the military. Greater miracles have been seen than that, imagination as-



sisting, she should speak the truth about some of these gentlemen. I remember an English novelist, a woman of genius, telling me that she was much commended for the impression she had managed to give in one of her tales of the nature and way of life of the French Protestant youth. She had been asked where she learned so much about this recondite being, she had been congratulated on her peculiar opportunities. These opportunities consisted in her having once, in Paris, as she ascended a staircase, passed an open door where, in the household of a *pasteur*, some of the young Protestants were seated at table round a finished meal. The glimpse made a picture; it lasted only a moment, but that moment was experience. She had got her impression, and she evolved her type. She knew what youth was, and what Protestantism; she also had the advantage of having seen what it was to be French; so that she converted these ideas into a concrete image, and produced a reality. Above all, however, she was blessed with the faculty which when you give it an inch takes an ell, and which for the artist is a much greater source of strength than any accident of residence or of place in the social scale. [The power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implication of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern, the condition of feeling life, in general, so completely that you are well on your way to knowing any particular corner of it — this cluster of gifts may almost be said to constitute





experience, and they occur in country and in town,  
and in the most differing stages of education. If  
experience consists of impressions, it may be said  
that impressions *are* experience, just as (have we not  
seen it?) they are the very air we breathe. There-  
fore, if I should certainly say to a novice, "Write  
from experience, and experience only," I should feel  
that this was a rather tantalizing monition if I were  
not careful immediately to add, "Try to be one of  
the people on whom nothing is lost!"

I am far from intending by this to minimize the  
importance of exactness — of truth of detail. One  
can speak best from one's own taste, and I may  
therefore venture to say that the air of reality (so-  
lidity of specification) seems to me to be the supreme  
virtue of a novel — the merit in which all its other  
merits (including that conscious moral purpose of  
which Mr. Besant speaks) helplessly and submis-  
sively depend. If it be not there, they are all as  
nothing, and if these be there they owe their effect  
to the success with which the author has produced  
the illusion of life. The cultivation of this success,  
the study of this exquisite process, form, to my  
taste, the beginning and the end of the art of the  
novelist. They are his inspiration, his despair,  
his reward, his torment, his delight. It is here,  
in very truth, that he competes with life; it is  
here that he competes with his brother, the painter,  
in his attempt to render the look of things,  
the look that conveys their meaning, to catch

the color, the relief, the expression, the surface, the substance of the human spectacle. It is in regard to this that Mr. Besant is well inspired when he bids him take notes. He cannot possibly take too many, he cannot possibly take enough. All life solicits him, and to "render" the simplest surface, to produce the most momentary illusion, is a very complicated business. His case would be easier, and the rule would be more exact, if Mr. Besant had been able to tell him what notes to take. But this I fear he can never learn in any hand-book; it is the business of his life. He has to take a great many in order to select a few, he has to work them up as he can, and even the guides and philosophers who might have most to say to him must leave him alone when it comes to the application of precepts, as we leave the painter in communion with his palette. That his characters "must be clear in outline," as Mr. Besant says — he feels that down to his boots; but how he shall make them so is a secret between his good angel and himself. It would be absurdly simple if he could be taught that a great deal of "description" would make them so, or that, on the contrary, the absence of description and the cultivation of dialogue, or the absence of dialogue and the multiplication of "incident," would rescue him from his difficulties. Nothing, for instance, is more possible than that he be of a turn of mind for which this odd, literal opposition of description and dialogue, incident and description, has little meaning



and light. People often talk of these things as if they had a kind of internecine distinctness, instead of melting into each other at every breath and being intimately associated parts of one general effort of expression. I cannot imagine composition existing in a series of blocks, nor conceive, in any novel worth discussing at all, of a passage of description that is not in its intention narrative, a passage of dialogue that is not in its intention descriptive, a touch of truth of any sort that does not partake of the nature of incident, and an incident that derives its interest from any other source than the general and only source of the success of a work of art, — that of being illustrative. A novel is a living thing, all one and continuous, like every other organism, and in proportion as it lives will it be found, I think, that in each of the parts there is something of each of the other parts. The critic who over the close texture of a finished work will pretend to trace a geography of items will mark some frontiers as artificial, I fear, as any that have been known to history. There is an old-fashioned distinction between the novel of character and the novel of incident, which must have cost many a smile to the intending romancer who was keen about his work. It appears to me as little to the point as the equally celebrated distinction between the novel and the romance — to answer as little to any reality. There are bad novels and good novels, as there are bad pictures and good pictures; but that is the only distinction



in which I see any meaning, and I can as little imagine speaking of a novel of character as I can imagine speaking of a picture of character. When one says picture, one says of character; when one says novel, one says of incident, and the terms may be transposed. What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character? What is a picture or a novel that is *not* of character? What else do we seek in it and find in it? It is an incident for a woman to stand up with her hand resting on a table and look out at you in a certain way; or, if it be not an incident, I think it will be hard to say what it is. At the same time it is an expression of character. If you say you don't see it (character in *that* — *allons donc*!) this is exactly what the artist, who has reasons of his own for thinking he *does* see it, undertakes to show you. When a young man makes up his mind that he has not faith enough, after all, to enter the church, as he intended, that is an incident, though you may not hurry to the end of the chapter to see whether perhaps he does n't change once more. I do not say that these are extraordinary or startling incidents. I do not pretend to estimate the degree of interest proceeding from them, for this will depend upon the skill of the painter. It sounds almost puerile to say that some incidents are intrinsically much more important than others, and I need not take this precaution, after having professed my sym-

pathy for the major ones, in remarking that the only classification of the novel that I can understand is into the interesting and the uninteresting.

The novel and the romance, the novel of incident and that of character, — these separations appear to me to have been made by critics and readers for their own convenience, and to help them out of some of their difficulties, but to have little reality or interest for the producer, from whose point of view it is, of course, that we are attempting to consider the art of fiction. The case is the same with another shadowy category, which Mr. Besant apparently is disposed to set up, — that of the “modern English novel;” unless, indeed, it be that in this matter he has fallen into an accidental confusion of standpoints. It is not quite clear whether he intends the remarks in which he alludes to it to be didactic or historical. It is as difficult to suppose a person intending to write a modern English, as to suppose him writing an ancient English novel; that is a label which begs the question. One writes the novel, one paints the picture of one’s language and of one’s time, and calling it modern English, will not, alas! make the difficult task any easier. No more, unfortunately, will calling this or that work of one’s fellow-artist a romance, — unless it be, of course, simply for the pleasantness of the thing, as, for instance, when Hawthorne gave this heading to his story of Blithedale. The French, who have brought the theory of fiction to remarkable com-



pleteness, have but one word for the novel, and have not attempted smaller things in it, that I can see, for that. I can think of no obligation to which the "romancer" would not be held equally with the novelist; the standard of execution is equally high for each. Of course it is of execution that we are talking, — that being the only point of a novel that is open to contention. This is, perhaps, too often lost sight of, only to produce interminable confusions and cross-purposes. We must grant the artist his subject, his idea, what the French call his *donnée*; our criticism is applied only to what he makes of it. Naturally I do not mean that we are bound to like it or find it interesting; in case we do not, our course is perfectly simple, to let it alone. We may believe that of a certain idea even the most sincere novelist can make nothing at all, and the event may perfectly justify our belief; but the failure will have been a failure to execute, and it is in the execution that the fatal weakness is recorded. If we pretend to respect the artist at all we must allow him his freedom of choice, in the face, in particular cases, of innumerable presumptions that the choice will not fructify. Art derives a considerable part of its beneficial exercise from flying in the face of presumptions, and some of the most interesting experiments of which it is capable are hidden in the bosom of common things. Gustave Flaubert has written a story about the devotion of a servant-girl to a parrot, and the production, highly finished as



it is, cannot on the whole be called a success. We are perfectly free to find it flat, but I think it might have been interesting; and I, for my part, am extremely glad he should have written it. It is a contribution to our knowledge of what can be done — or what cannot. Ivan Turgénieff has written a tale about a deaf and dumb serf and a lap-dog, and the thing is touching, loving, a little masterpiece. He struck the note of life where Gustave Flaubert missed it; he flew in the face of a presumption and achieved a victory.

Nothing, of course, will ever take the place of the good old fashion of “liking” a work of art or not liking it; the more improved criticism will not abolish that primitive, that ultimate, test. I mention this to guard myself from the accusation of intimating that the idea, the subject, of a novel or a picture does not matter. It matters, to my sense, in the highest degree, and if I might put up a prayer it would be that artists should select none but the richest. Some, as I have already hastened to admit, are much more substantial than others, and it would be a happily arranged world in which persons intending to treat them should be exempt from confusions and mistakes. This fortunate condition will arrive only, I fear, on the same day that critics become purged from error. Meanwhile, I repeat, we do not judge the artist with fairness unless we say to him: “Oh, I grant you your starting-point, because if I did not I should seem to prescribe to

you, and heaven forbid I should take that responsibility. If I pretend to tell you what you must not take, you will call upon me to tell you then what you must take; in which case I shall be nicely caught! Moreover, it is n't till I have accepted your data that I can begin to measure you. I have the standard; I judge you by what you propose, and you must look out for me there. Of course I may not care for your idea at all; I may think it silly, or stale, or unclean; in which case I wash my hands of you altogether. I may content myself with believing that you will not have succeeded in being interesting, but I shall, of course, not attempt to demonstrate it, and you will be as indifferent to me as I am to you. I need n't remind you that there are all sorts of tastes; who can know it better? Some people, for excellent reasons, don't like to read about carpenters; others, for reasons even better, don't like to read about courtesans. Many object to Americans. Others (I believe they are mainly editors and publishers) won't look at Italians. Some readers don't like quiet subjects; others don't like bustling ones. Some enjoy a complete illusion; others revel in a complete deception. They choose their novels accordingly, and if they don't care about your idea they won't, *a fortiori*, care about your treatment."

So that it comes back very quickly, as I have said, to the liking; in spite of M. Zola, who reasons less powerfully than he represents, and who will



not reconcile himself to this absoluteness of taste, thinking that there are certain things that people ought to like, and that they can be made to like.

I am quite at a loss to imagine anything (at any rate in this matter of fiction) that people *ought* to like or to dislike. Selection will be sure to take care of itself, for it has a constant motive behind it. That motive is simply experience. As people feel life, so they will feel the art that is most closely related to it. This closeness of relation is what we should never forget in talking of the effort of the novel. Many people speak of it as a factitious, artificial form, a product of ingenuity, the business of which is to alter and arrange the things that surround us, to translate them into conventional, traditional moulds. This, however, is a view of the matter which carries us but a very short way, condemns the art to an eternal repetition of a few familiar *clichés*, cuts short its development, and leads us straight up to a dead wall. Catching the very note and trick, the strange irregular rhythm of life, that is the attempt whose strenuous force keeps Fiction upon her feet. In proportion as in what she offers us we see life *without* rearrangement, do we feel that we are touching the truth; in proportion as we see it *with* rearrangement do we feel that we are being put off with a substitute, a compromise and convention. It is not uncommon to hear an extraordinary assurance of remark in regard to this matter of rearranging, which is often spoken of as



if it were the last word of art. Mr. Besant seems to me in danger of falling into this great error with his rather unguarded talk about "selection." Art is essentially selection, but it is a selection whose main care is to be typical, to be inclusive. For many people art means rose-colored windows, and selection means picking a bouquet for Mrs. Grundy. They will tell you glibly that artistic considerations have nothing to do with the disagreeable, with the ugly; they will rattle off shallow commonplaces about the province of art and the limits of art, till you are moved to some wonder in return as to the province and the limits of ignorance. It appears to me that no one can ever have made a seriously artistic attempt without becoming conscious of an immense increase — a kind of revelation — of freedom. One perceives, in that case — by the light of a heavenly ray — that the province of art is all life, all feeling, all observation, all vision. As Mr. Besant so justly intimates, it is all experience. That is a sufficient answer to those who maintain that it must not touch the painful, who stick into its divine unconscious bosom little prohibitory inscriptions on the end of sticks, such as we see in public gardens — "It is forbidden to walk on the grass; it is forbidden to touch the flowers; it is not allowed to introduce dogs, or to remain after dark; it is requested to keep to the right." The young aspirant in the line of fiction, whom we continue to imagine, will do nothing without taste, for in that case his freedom

would be of little use to him ; but the first advantage of his taste will be to reveal to him the absurdity of the little sticks and tickets. If he have taste, I must add, of course he will have ingenuity, and my disrespectful reference to that quality just now was not meant to imply that it is useless in fiction. But it is only a secondary aid ; the first is a vivid sense of reality.

Mr. Besant has some remarks on the question of "the story," which I shall not attempt to criticise, though they seem to me to contain a singular ambiguity, because I do not think I understand them. I cannot see what is meant by talking as if there were a part of a novel which is the story and part of it which for mystical reasons is not — unless indeed the distinction be made in a sense in which it is difficult to suppose that anyone should attempt to convey anything. "The story," if it represents anything, represents the subject, the idea, the data of the novel ; and there is surely no "school" — Mr. Besant speaks of a school — which urges that a novel should be all treatment and no subject. There must assuredly be something to treat ; every school is intimately conscious of that. This sense of the story being the idea, the starting-point, of the novel, is the only one that I see in which it can be spoken of as something different from its organic whole ; and since, in proportion as the work is successful, the idea permeates and penetrates it, informs and animates it, so that every word and every punctua-



tion-point contribute directly to the expression, in that proportion do we lose our sense of the story being a blade which may be drawn more or less out of its sheath. The story and the novel, the idea and the form, are the needle and thread, and I never heard of a guild of tailors who recommended the use of the thread without the needle or the needle without the thread. Mr. Besant is not the only critic who may be observed to have spoken as if there were certain things in life which constitute stories and certain others which do not. I find the same odd implication in an entertaining article in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, devoted, as it happens, to Mr. Besant's lecture. "The story is the thing!" says this graceful writer, as if with a tone of opposition to another idea. I should think it was, as every painter who, as the time for "sending in" his picture looms in the distance, finds himself still in quest of a subject—as every belated artist, not fixed about his *donnée*, will heartily agree. There are some subjects which speak to us, and others which do not, but he would be a clever man who should undertake to give a rule by which the story and the no-story should be known apart. It is impossible (to me at least) to imagine any such rule which shall not be altogether arbitrary. The writer in the *Pall Mall* opposes the delightful (as I suppose) novel of "Margot la Balafrée" to certain tales in which "Bostonian nymphs" appear to have "rejected English dukes for psychological reasons." I



am not acquainted with the romance just designated, and can scarcely forgive the *Pall Mall* critic for not mentioning the name of the author; but the title appears to refer to a lady who may have received a scar in some heroic adventure. I am inconsolable at not being acquainted with this episode, but am utterly at a loss to see why it is a story when the rejection (or acceptance) of a duke is not, and why a reason, psychological or other, is not a subject when a cicatrix is. They are all particles of the multitudinous life with which the novel deals, and surely no dogma which pretends to make it lawful to touch the one and unlawful to touch the other will stand for a moment on its feet. It is the special picture that must stand or fall, according as it seems to possess truth or to lack it. Mr. Besant does not, to my sense, light up the subject by intimating that a story must, under penalty of not being a story, consist of "adventures." Why of adventures more than of green spectacles? He mentions a category of impossible things, and among them he places "fiction without adventure." Why without adventure more than without matrimony, or celibacy, or parturition, or cholera, or hydropathy, or Jansenism? This seems to me to bring the novel back to the hapless little rôle of being an artificial, ingenious thing—bring it down from its large, free character of an immense and exquisite correspondence with life. And what *is* adventure, when it comes to that, and by what sign

is the listening pupil to recognize it? It is an adventure — an immense one — for me to write this little article; and for a Bostonian nymph to reject an English duke is an adventure only less stirring, I should say, than for an English duke to be rejected by a Bostonian nymph. I see dramas within dramas in that, and innumerable points of view. A psychological reason is, to my imagination, an object adorably pictorial; to catch the tint of its complexion — I feel as if that idea might inspire one to Titianesque efforts. There are few things more exciting to me, in short, than a psychological reason, and yet, I protest, the novel seems to me the most magnificent form of art. I have just been reading, at the same time, the delightful story of "Treasure Island," by Mr. Robert Louis Stevenson, and the last tale from M. Edmond de Goncourt, which is entitled "Chérie." One of these works treats of murders, mysteries, islands of dreadful renown, hairbreadth escapes, miraculous coincidences and buried doubloons. The other treats of a little French girl who lived in a fine house in Paris and died of wounded sensibility because no one would marry her. I call "Treasure Island" delightful, because it appears to me to have succeeded wonderfully in what it attempts; and I venture to bestow no epithet upon "Chérie," which strikes me as having failed in what it attempts — that is, in tracing the development of the moral consciousness of a child. But one of these productions strikes



me as exactly as much of a novel as the other, and as having a "story" quite as much. The moral consciousness of a child is as much a part of life as the islands of the Spanish Main, and the one sort of geography seems to me to have those "surprises" of which Mr. Besant speaks, quite as much as the other. For myself (since it comes back in the last resort, as I say, to the preference of the individual), the picture of the child's experience has the advantage that I can at successive steps (an immense luxury, near to the "sensual pleasure" of which Mr. Besant's critic in the *Pall Mall* speaks) say Yes or No, as it may be, to what the artist puts before me. I have been a child, but I have never been on a quest for a buried treasure, and it is a simple accident that with M. de Goncourt I should have for the most part to say No. With George Eliot, when she painted that country, I always said Yes.

The most interesting part of Mr. Besant's lecture is unfortunately the briefest passage — his very cursory allusion to the "conscious moral purpose" of the novel. Here again it is not very clear whether he is recording a fact or laying down a principle; it is a great pity that in the latter case he should not have developed his idea. This branch of the subject is of immense importance, and Mr. Besant's few words point to considerations of the widest reach, not to be lightly disposed of. He will have treated the art of fiction but superficially who is not prepared to go every inch of the way that these

considerations will carry him. It is for this reason that at the beginning of these remarks I was careful to notify the reader that my reflections on so large a theme have no pretension to be exhaustive. Like Mr. Besant, I have left the question of the morality of the novel till the last, and at the last I find I have used up my space. It is a question surrounded with difficulties, as witness the very first that meets us, in the form of a definite question, on the threshold. Vagueness, in such a discussion, is fatal, and what is the meaning of your morality and your conscious moral purpose? Will you not define your terms and explain how (a novel being a picture) a picture can be either moral or immoral? You wish to paint a moral picture or carve a moral statue; will you not tell us how you would set about it? We are discussing the Art of Fiction; questions of art are questions (in the widest sense) of execution; questions of morality are quite another affair, and will you not let us see how it is that you find it so easy to mix them up? These things are so clear to Mr. Besant that he has deduced from them a law which he sees embodied in English Fiction and which is "a truly admirable thing and a great cause for congratulation." It is a great cause for congratulation, indeed, when such thorny problems become as smooth as silk. I may add that, in so far as Mr. Besant perceives that in point of fact English Fiction has addressed itself preponderantly to these delicate questions, he will appear



to many people to have made a vain discovery. They will have been positively struck, on the contrary, with the moral timidity of the usual English novelist; with his (or with her) aversion to face the difficulties with which, on every side, the treatment of reality bristles. He is apt to be extremely shy (whereas the picture that Mr. Besant draws is a picture of boldness), and the sign of his work, for the most part, is a cautious silence on certain subjects.

In the English novel (by which I mean the American as well), more than in any other, there is a traditional difference between that which people know and that which they agree to admit that they know, that which they see and that which they speak of, that which they feel to be a part of life and that which they allow to enter into literature. There is the great difference, in short, between what they talk of in conversation, and what they talk of in print. The essence of moral energy is to survey the whole field, and I should directly reverse Mr. Besant's remark, and say, not that the English novel has a purpose, but that it has a diffidence.

To what degree a purpose in a work of art is a source of corruption I shall not attempt to inquire; the one that seems to me least dangerous is the purpose of making a perfect work. As for our novel, I may say, lastly, on this score, that, as we find it in England to-day, it strikes me as addressed in a large degree to "young people," and that this in itself constitutes a presumption that it will be

rather shy. There are certain things which it is generally agreed not to discuss, not even to mention, before young people. That is very well, but the absence of discussion is not a symptom of the moral passion. The purpose of the English novel — “a truly admirable thing, and a great cause for congratulation” — strikes me, therefore, as rather negative.

[There is one point at which the moral sense and the artistic sense lie very near together; that is, in the light of the very obvious truth that the deepest quality of a work of art will always be the quality of the mind of the producer. In proportion as that mind is rich and noble, will the novel, the picture, the statue, partake of the substance of beauty and truth. To be constituted of such elements is, to my vision, to have purpose enough. No good novel will ever proceed from a superficial mind; that seems to me an axiom which, for the artist in fiction, will cover all needful moral ground; if the youthful aspirant take it to heart, it will illuminate for him many of the mysteries of “purpose.”] There are many other useful things that might be said to him, but I have come to the end of my article, and can only touch them as I pass. The critic in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, whom I have already quoted, draws attention to the danger, in speaking of the art of fiction, of generalizing. The danger that he has in mind is rather, I imagine, that of particularizing; for there are some comprehensive remarks which, in



addition to those embodied in Mr. Besant's suggestive lecture, might, without fear of misleading him, be addressed to the ingenuous student. [ I should remind him first of the magnificence of the form that is open to him, which offers to sight so few restrictions and such innumerable opportunities. The other arts, in comparison, appear confined and hampered; the various conditions under which they are exercised are so rigid and definite. But the only condition that I can think of attaching to the composition of the novel is, as I have already said, that it be interesting. This freedom is a splendid privilege, and the first lesson of the young novelist is to learn to be worthy of it. "Enjoy it as it deserves," I should say to him; "take possession of it, explore it to its utmost extent, reveal it, rejoice in it. All life belongs to you, and don't listen either to those who would shut you up into corners of it and tell you that it is only here and there that art inhabits, or to those who would persuade you that this heavenly messenger wings her way outside of life altogether, breathing a superfine air and turning away her head from the truth of things. There is no impression of life, no manner of seeing it and feeling it, to which the plan of the novelist may not offer a place; you have only to remember that talents so dissimilar as those of Alexandre Dumas and Jane Austen, Charles Dickens and Gustave Flaubert, have worked in this field with equal glory. Don't think too much about optimism and pessim-

ism; try and catch the color of life itself. In France to-day we see a prodigious effort (that of Emile Zola, to whose solid and serious work no explorer of the capacity of the novel can allude without respect), we see an extraordinary effort, vitiated by a spirit of pessimism on a narrow basis. M. Zola is magnificent, but he strikes an English reader as ignorant; he has an air of working in the dark; if he had as much light as energy, his results would be of the highest value. As for the aberrations of a shallow optimism, the ground (of English fiction especially) is strewn with their brittle particles as with broken glass. If you must indulge in conclusions, let them have the taste of a wide knowledge. Remember that your first duty is to be as complete as possible—to make as perfect a work. Be generous and delicate, and then, in the vulgar phrase, go in!”

HENRY JAMES.









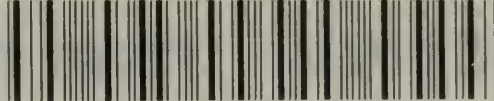








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